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Greatest Christmas Joy Comes to Those Who Attach Most Religious Significance to the Holiday

The religious and secular celebration of Christmas may often be in conflict, but the greatest joy of Christmas would seem to be achieved by those who take the day's religious significance most seriously, and share their fortune and joy with others who are lonely or in need.

Christmas is celebrated by 90% of adults, Hanukkah by 1%, and 4% say they celebrate both religious holidays. The remaining 5% of the population celebrates neither.

The trappings of Christmas are apparent in most homes: 85% have a Christmas tree, 78% exchanged Christmas cards with friends and relatives, gifts are opened by 71% on Christmas day, 68% attend Christmas parties, and 48% (mostly women) bake Christmas cookies. The sound of Christmas music enters 87% of America's homes, but only 54% of the people usually sing Christmas carols. The average Christmas celebrant will spend nearly $500 on gifts and an additional $150 on other expenses for the holiday.

Christmas is celebrated in a strongly religious way by 38% of adults, but 37% say they are just somewhat strong in their religious celebration of the day, and 19% are not at all religious in their observance of Christmas. One person in 20 (5%) does not celebrate Christmas in any fashion. Those who invest the greatest religious meaning to Christmas are also the most likely to say they experience a great deal of joy on Christmas day (81%).

Christmas worship services are observed on the eve by 36%, and on the day itself by 25%. This includes 8% who say they attend on both Christmas eve and Christmas day. Catholics (82%) are far more likely than Protestants (53%) to attend Christmas worship services.

Three persons in four (77%) are moved by the spirit of the season to give gifts or to provide assistance to the poor. Beyond those who are poor in a material sense, are many who may not find much joy during the season. One person in three (32%) sometimes feels sad or depressed at Christmas time. Hit hardest are those who have lost a spouse through death, divorce, or separation. Children appear to provide relief from such depression for only a few single parents. Although single parents might draw support from the extended family of the congregation, this does not often appear to be the case, as they are least likely to attend worship services at Christmas.

Preparation for Christmas creates a great deal of stress for 15% of the adult population, and 4% say they do not look forward to the rituals of the season.

Although Christmas usually is a time when people wish to be together, especially with their loved ones, this is not always possible. Last year, 13% were away from home at Christmas, and while many were visiting with relatives or friends, 10% say they were unable to spend the holiday with someone who mattered to them. In the extreme, 3% of the population spent Christmas alone. For 1%, Christmas dinner was not by the family hearth, but in a restaurant.

Gallup Polls in recent years have found that 70% of the adult American population believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ. On a Gallup Poll taken last October, however, 90% named the holiday that bears his name as their favorite. While the secular aspects of Christmas may bring a sense of happiness to many, only 38% of the adults interviewed say the day has a strongly religious meaning for them.

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,227 adults, 18 or older, conducted October 12 through 15, 1989. For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The illuminated capital letters in this month's issue were created in America in the twentieth century. The style is entitled "Tory."

Narrowing the Gap Between Belief and Practice

George Gallup, Jr.

Editor's note: Recently Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry turned the tables on George Gallup, Jr. and interviewed him on his views on religion in our society. The following remarks by him are taken from that interview.

One senses a growing search in our society for meaning in life, coupled with a need for deeper relationships with others. This, and the fact that people's basic beliefs appear to be intact, gives great hope and opportunity to the Church.

There is no reason for the Church not to grow. People are searching. They just need to be rooted better. We are trying to make Christians without the Bible. The reason that people so often seem susceptible to any movement that comes along is because they are not biblically rooted.

There are three steps for overcoming this problem and narrowing the gap between belief and practice.

1. **Deepen prayer life.** Clergy and religious leaders too often assume that people pray more than they do and read the Bible more than they do. They assume that these are in place, but they are not, and people need encouragement to pray and study the Bible.

2. **Teach people to share their faith.** There is a great need for clear and compelling presentations of the Gospel. I suspect that a lot of people have never really felt the power of the Gospel, because it has never been presented to them in a clear and compelling manner.

3. **Listen increasingly to the laity.** Our surveys have shown that the laity want a greater role in the Church. They could, for example, take over many of the Church's administrative functions to free the clergy for spiritual direction. What the laity really want from the clergy are spiritual leaders, not bureaucrats.

The first two actions could be done most effectively through small groups. I am enthusiastic about small groups because our surveys have shown their importance, but also because I have seen the miracle of healed relationships. Prayer is the key and the environment should be unthreatening.

There is a place in small groups for intensive study of the Bible, because in them you can really *pray* the Bible to find out what it says to you and how it can change your daily life. Because people can become vulnerable to each other when working together in a small group, they are wonderful places to learn how to share one's faith, learn, and worship as a community.

Small groups potentially are a powerful tool to rebuild and renew a congregation. The quickest way for a parish to grow, and I do not mean just in the numerical sense, but spiritually, is to get people to invite others to participate in its life. By inviting others you are telling people that the Church is extremely important in your life and that it ought to be an important part of their lives as well. Small groups encourage sharing spiritual experience.

In a society where too often the impact of the Gospel is lessening and the reading of the Scripture is sliding, there is a need for both rigor and innovation in devotion to Scripture and Gospel. The Church, its schools, and its leaders need to help its members achieve inner renewal and corporate renewal.

■ **FACTS ON RELIGION**

Christmas

Consider Christmas favorite holiday	90%
Have a Christmas tree at home	85
Usually have an artificial tree	34
Decorate it on Christmas eve	4
Send Christmas cards	78
Give gifts or assist the poor during Christmas season	77
Enjoy Christmas day a great deal	71
Enjoy Christmas eve a great deal	66
Open presents on Christmas day	71
Open them Christmas eve	45
Believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ	70
Attend Christmas parties	68
Sing Christmas carols	54
Bake Christmas cookies	48
Make some Christmas gifts	46
Consider Christmas strongly religious holiday	38
Attend church Christmas eve	36
Attend Christmas day	25
Sometimes feel depressed at Christmas	32
Enjoy Christmas shopping a great deal	28
Do most shopping at last minute	16
Away from home at Christmas last year	13
Unable to spend Christmas with loved ones	10
Spent Christmas alone	3
Ate Christmas dinner at a restaurant	1

Churches Rated Best Able to Deal with Local Community Problems

Survey after survey has demonstrated that those who are active in their church are the most likely candidates to perform volunteer efforts in their community, and so it should come as no surprise to find that churches, synagogues, and volunteer groups inspire the most confidence among people to solve the problems facing the local community. A near-majority of citizens also consider the local schools a positive force. The local media and business community more often inspire confidence than does city hall. State and federal government, national business leaders, and political parties generally are viewed as institutions that are too remote to be able to deal effectively with local community conditions.

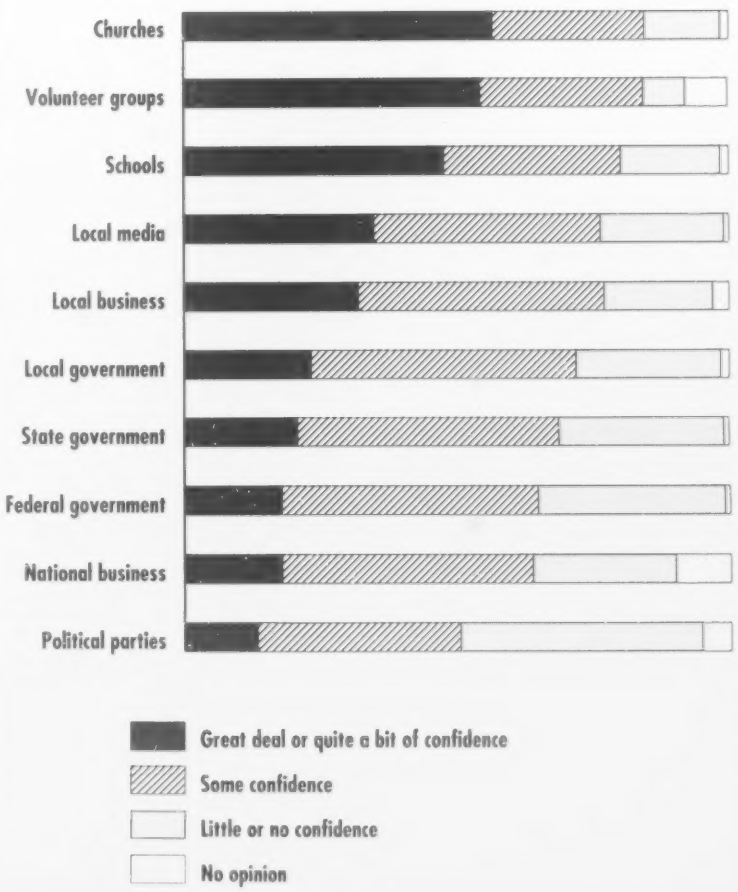
Nearly six people in 10 (57%) say they have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in churches, synagogues and other religious institutions to deal with local community problems. Nearly as many expressed confidence in volunteer groups such as the YMCA (54%), and in the local public school system (47%). All other groups tested on the survey inspired high confidence from only one person in three or fewer.

These opinions of the ability of institutions to deal with local problems are usually voiced uniformly across different segments of American society, except that women are more inclined, and young adults are less inclined, to place their trust in religious institutions. A much higher proportion of women than men say they have confidence in religious institutions, by a margin of 65% to 48%.

A majority of young people, ages 18 to 29, say they have a "great deal" (22%) or "quite a lot of confidence" (35%) in the ability of volunteer groups to deal with the issues facing their community. An additional 32% of the young people interviewed say they have at least "some" confidence in voluntary agencies. Very few offer the opinion that they have "hardly any" (4%) or no confidence (2%) in volunteer efforts as a force in solving local problems.

Similar marks are given to churches, synagogues and other religious institutions, with a majority of young people (52%) saying they have high confidence in them, 30% having some confidence, and only 14% expressing little or no faith in their ability to deal with local problems. Adults who are 30 years or older generally have greater confidence in the religious institutions than those who are younger, with 60% giving them high marks. Interestingly, young people show higher confidence than their elders in all the other institutions tested on the survey. This could suggest that the initial impulse of peo-

Confidence in Ability of Institutions to Solve Local Community Problems



ple when they are young is to seek solutions from secular institutions, but later in life they can be expected to turn more to the church to channel their voluntary instincts to serve the community.

Currently, over one person in five (22%) is involved in volunteer work with local and community problems, and an 7% say they definitely would like to be involved.

Church and religious organizations head the list of volunteer organizations where volunteers say they devote the most time, with 24% naming this channel for their energies. Next in frequency of mention are youth-oriented activities such as youth groups (11%) or school organizations such as the PTA (9%).

Local economic pressures, drugs, and crime head the list of local community problems named as most important.

Most Important Local Problems

Economy	23%
Drugs	16
Crime, gangs	10
Environment	8
Education	7
Government, politics	4
Transportation, traffic	3
The homeless	2
Growth, development	2
Other	13
None, don't know	12
	100%

Here is how the questions were asked:

Thinking about the problems facing your city or local community, how much confidence do you have in the ability of each of the following institutions to deal with those problems? Do you have a great deal of confidence, quite a lot, some, hardly any, or no confidence?

Specifically, what do you think is the most important problem facing your city or local community today?

Do you, yourself, happen to be involved at the present time in any volunteer work with local and community problems? Which one do you give the most time to? Would you like to be involved—definitely, perhaps, or not?

The findings are based upon a nationwide sample of 1,025 adults, interviewed by telephone during the period of November 6–9, 1990. The study was conducted by The George H. Gallup International Institute for The National Civic League.

Dubious Distinction for The Bible

NEW YORK—An informal survey on library thefts conducted for *The New York Times Book Review* (November 18, 1990) found that "the Bible is clearly *the* most stolen book, an all-time favorite that people can't resist lifting. Bookstores and libraries report that thieves devise clever stratagems for acquiring Bibles."

The major source of purloined Bibles, however, may be hotels and motels where an industry spokesman said they "are considered housekeeping items like soap and towels." Gideon Society executive director Frank Tate is quoted as saying that the society does not distinguish between those that are stolen and those that are defaced or worn out, but that 29 million copies in 147 countries were replaced last year.

Advertisement

Start 1991 With These Valuable Studies

The Role of the Bible in American Society by George Gallup, Jr. and Robert Bezilla provides a comprehensive overview of attitudes towards the Bible and trends on Bible reading and knowledge of the Scriptures. Cost per copy is $9.95.

Religion in America 1990—Annual report on the key measures on religious attitudes, beliefs and practices, and predictions for the 1990s. Cost per copy is $30. A limited number of back issues are available for $10 each.

The Unchurched American ... 10 Years Later—An important update on the factors that cause people to leave the church, and those that cause them to return. Cost per copy is $29.

100 Questions and Answers: Religion in America by George Gallup, Jr. and Sarah Jones. A single-volume compendium of the 100 most important questions we have surveyed in the area of religion. A handy reference tool in book size format that categorizes and analyzes key survey data. Price per copy is $30.

Faith Development and Your Ministry—A study of the stages of spiritual growth in one's life, and the impact of life crises on faith development. Cost per copy is $25. Only a few copies of this popular study remain; we expect it to be sold out by early 1991.

Emerging Trends—Commentary on surveys on religious beliefs and practices; 10 issues a year; annual subscription is $35 domestic, $45 foreign. Renew your subscription now before the 1991 postal rate hike!

All prices include postage and handling. If you would like to place an order or to receive more information about these publications, contact the Princeton Religion Research Center, 100 Palmer Square, Suite 213D, Princeton, NJ 08542. Telephone (609) 921-8112.

Many Adults Engaged in Religious Studies

About one American adult in five in 1990 reports involvement in Bible study (21%), prayer or meditation groups (21%), and religious education classes (20%).

The likelihood of participation in such activities increases as the population grows older. Religious education, for example, usually is thought of by many as an activity of the young, but among adults at least, those under 30 years of age (12%) are about half as likely as people in their middle ages (25%), or over 50 (20%) to be involved in religious study. Bible study increases from 16% among those who are under 30 to 21% among the middle-aged and to 25% among older Americans. A similar pattern is noted for prayer and meditation group participation, which rises from 17% among the young to 23% among those who are in the oldest age bracket.

Black adults show higher rates of participation in religious activities than whites. Only 20% of the whites interviewed participated in each of the three activities tested, compared to Bible study by 36% of the black respondents, prayer or meditation group participation by 29%, and attendance of religious education classes by 24%.

The South (30%) and Midwest (22%) are the regions where Bible study most likely is to be reported. It is decidedly less prevalent in the West (15%) or East (13%). The West (24%), however, matches the South (25%) in participation in prayer or meditation groups (although in certain parts of California the term "meditation" may take on different meanings). Lesser participation in prayer or meditation is found in the Midwest (19%) and East (15%). Religious education classes find their best attendance in the South (24%) and Midwest (19%). Fewer people in West (19%) and in the East (15%) currently are receiving religious instructions.

The findings are taken from the question, *Which, if any, of these are you involved in or do you practice? Bible study? Prayer or meditation groups? Religious education classes?*

The survey was taken by Gallup among a nationwide sample of 1,021 adults, age 18 and older, during September 1990.

Religious Activities

	Bible study	Prayer/ meditation groups	Religious education classes
National	21%	21%	20%
Gender			
Male	19	20	18
Female	22	21	22
Age			
8–29	16	17	12
30–49	21	20	25
50 & over	25	23	20
Region			
East	13	15	15
Midwest	22	19	22
South	30	25	24
West	15	24	19
Race			
White	20	20	20
Black	36	29	24
Other	24	22	15
Education			
College grads.	20	18	25
College inc.	24	29	29
High school grads.	19	18	17
Not H.S. grads.	22	24	27
Income			
$50,000 & over	16	18	23
$30,000–$49,999	25	22	24
$20,000–$29,999	22	26	19
Under $20,000	23	21	16

Christmas Suggestions

- There can be many distractions at Christmas time, but putting Christ back into Christmas is a matter of individual conscience. Help others to understand the increased joy you may experience on his day.
- Be sensitive to the needs of interfaith couples who may struggle most at this time of year to reconcile their differences.
- The church should recognize that this can be a highly stressful period for some people: Don't add to the demands that are placed upon them.
- The sight of couples worshipping or celebrating together will be painful for some who have lost their partners. Recognize the special grieving needs of people at Christmas time.
- Single parent and child alike may find church a painful experience if activities seem geared mainly to families where both parents are present.
- Reach out to the lonely traveler who through circumstance may be away from home this day.
- This can be the happiest day for children, but also teach them by word and example the great joy that you achieve by understanding its significance, and by sharing your love and wealth with others on Christmas.
- Provide alternatives to the synthetic trappings of the secular world by providing opportunities for people to sing carols, make gifts, help the needy, comfort those poor in spirit.

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